



5-2009

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Rachel Nicole Moran

*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

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## Recommended Citation

Moran, Rachel Nicole, "Education Reform: An Analysis of the purpose and function of public education." (2009). *University of Tennessee Honors Thesis Projects*.  
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Education Reform: An Analysis of the Purpose and Function of Public Education

Rachel Moran

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Though no specific provisions are made for public education in the Constitution of the United States of America, this topic is one that has much gravitas in American society—and this is appropriately so. The American public school system is one of the largest, if not the largest, public institution in the country. In addition to its immense size, the American public school system's importance stems from the heavy burden it bears: educating America's youth. The culmination of these two factors suggests that its expanse and influence are theoretically limitless. It is safe to say that every American will encounter the public school system in one way or another. Even those who choose to attend private schools or participate in home schools make the decision to do so based on what public schools are or are not.

Unsurprisingly, this vastness of America's public school system, both in size and responsibility, has made it an incessant "hot topic" of American discourse. A sundry of opinions exist regarding the topic, and each claims to be the solution for what ails the public school system. However, since the Constitution does not explore, let alone mention, the institution of the public school system, there is no historical ideal to serve as a unifying model to critique or adapt. Thus, the criticisms that have emerged throughout the entire history of America's public school system are entirely subjective in nature. Each varies according to what the perceived purpose and function of America's public school system should be. Moreover, there is not one variable that influences these opinions. Current events, public opinion, the economy, and global relations are just a few entities that have guided the evolution of the public school system.

Despite the significant attention that American public school system has received, public education in the United States is still touted as an unresolved issue. Problems still exist within the institution, and much controversy surrounds the proposed solutions. Still, the idea prevails that the problems affecting the American public school system can be remedied. This paper

serves as an extension of this belief. After consulting the past and present of American public education, this paper seeks to suggest the appropriate purpose and function of the public school system in the United States of America. This paper is divided into three main sections: The History of Public Education, Public Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and Proposed Solutions for the Future of Public Education. The first two sections are the products of extensive research. Both are relatively brief and serve to create a foundational perspective of public education in the United States. The third section has a basis in research, but is primarily the informed opinion of the author. Consequently, its contents are merely a suggestion. In no way is it to be interpreted as an ultimatum for the American public school system. Rather, the third section should be considered one of many possibilities that exist for the future America's public schools.

#### The History of Public Education

Though the United States is a comparatively young country, the history of its public school system is lengthy and complex. Many significant periods mark the progress of America's public schools, and each has its own extensive background. In attempts to streamline four centuries of American public education, this section is divided chronologically into sub-sections: the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Each section highlights educational trends as well as denotes the purpose and function of public schools for its respective time period.

##### *Public Education in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*

The history of public education in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is quite disjointed. This is logical considering that for the majority of this time period, most colonists were in survival mode (Spring, 2008). Education, although important, was not the first priority for many. Consequently, there was not any real unifying system for public education. Each of the colonies

had different ideals and policies regarding public education. Still, there were some overarching similarities that establish a general idea of the public education system in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

For example, despite the lack of a unified education system, the colonies all seemed to have a democratic outlook on education. They thought that everyone should be exposed to some type of academic instruction (Judd, 1918). This is because the early colonists thought that education, as an institution, could holistically better society and, in turn, abolish all types of immorality, including crime and poverty (Spring, 2008). The Massachusetts Bay Colony was the first government to codify this idea when it passed the “Old Deluder Satan Act” of 1647. This legislation was the first of its kind; it required that all towns provide some type of educational instruction to its citizens as a means of keeping them from the temptations of Satan. This law was significant because it mandated compulsory education, and many other colonies passed similar legislation shortly thereafter (Allison, 1995).

The colonists felt the best way to achieve this utopian society was to create schools that maintained the authority of the “governing religion.” That is, the purpose of schools was to teach pupils to obey the government and the Calvinist religion; in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, these entities were virtually synonymous (Spring, 2008). This was accomplished through a curriculum that perpetuated the “four R’s:” reading, writing, ‘rithmetic, and religion (Wright 2006).

While colonists felt that all pupils should be exposed to the four R’s, education during the 17<sup>th</sup> century was hardly universal. There were a variety of schools during this century, and each was meant to provide a specific type of education. Moreover, some of these schools were designed to teach only the four R’s, while others provided training for higher education or employment.

Reading and writing schools were the most basic schools in terms of curriculum. The purpose of them was just as it sounds—to teach reading and writing. Reading and writing schools are congruent with the stereotypical image of colonial schools. These are the schools that used the hornbook and relied on scripture and catechism to teach basic literacy skills. It is important to note that reading and writing schools were also the most accessible schools; anyone could attend them (Spring, 2008).

In terms of curricular rigor, dame schools, also known as petty schools, were slightly more advanced than reading and writing schools. They were called “dame schools” because they often took place in the teacher’s, or dame’s, kitchen. Dame schools were the first to use *The New England Primer*. Dame schools were less accessible than reading and writing schools because they served as a pre-requisite to grammar schools. Notably, a division between public and private education in the United States began in colonial times; those who could afford private tutors opted to hire them in lieu of sending their children to dame schools (Spring, 2008).

Grammar schools followed dame schools in the colonial hierarchy of public education, and they functioned as college preparatory institutions. As a result, grammar schools extended their curriculum to cover the classics, and pupils who attended grammar schools learned both Latin and Greek. Moreover, grammar schools also required pupils to commit more of their time to learning; they were seven-year, seven-day a week programs. Although grammar schools were not exclusive institutions, their elevated rigor deterred many from attending. Still, some argued that grammar schools did serve as a means of social mobility for the middle and lower classes because they were meant to train and educate society’s leaders. Not everyone was required, let alone expected, to attend. However, those who did attend grammar schools later attended universities, and a university education yielded an elite societal status. As an aside, it is worth

mentioning that some argued that grammar schools perpetuated the status quo because so few could devote the time and energy to attending grammar schools. This debate regarding the possibility of social mobility through the grammar school was popular during this time (Spring, 2008).

A separate yet equally valid type of education during colonial times was the apprenticeship. Student apprentices did not learn traditional academic skills; rather, they learned a trade such as welding or tanning. Apprenticeships were also a form of social mobility because poorer families could apprentice their children to middle-class businessmen. These apprentices would learn a marketable skill that would give them the financial security that their parents could not (Spring, 2008).

In general, the 17<sup>th</sup> century established many of the ideals about education that persisted and still exist as popular schools of thought in regards to public education (Allison, 1995). A particular example of this legacy includes the argument that schools can serve as a social panacea, meaning that schools have the potential to remedy any and all social problems by means of early intervention. . Another significant debate that has prevailed is the notion that schools can promote or prevent social mobility (Spring, 2008). Less specific but equally important is the division between the purely academic schools and apprenticeships. This division of the seventeenth century serves as a rudimentary precursor to the twentieth century debate between the traditional high school curriculum and the differentiated curriculum, which consists of both college preparatory and vocational courses . The educational policies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century undoubtedly serve as the foundation for all subsequent purposes and functions of the public education system in the United States (Spring, 2008).

*Public Education in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*

In general, public education in the 18<sup>th</sup> century resembled that of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in both purpose and function; this is because the majority of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was also a part of the colonial time period. Consequently, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was still no unifying public school system, and the focus of the curriculum was still quite authoritarian in nature. Through the four R's, pupils were taught to defer to God and the government.

However, one significant innovation did materialize in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the academy. Academies, like grammar schools, were not "public schools" in the modern sense, meaning not everyone attended. Still, like grammar schools, they also existed to prepare students for a university education. Academies were founded in response to the traditional colonial grammar school, and they differed from them because they did not adopt Protestant Calvinism as the curricular foundation. Rather, the purpose of the academy was to promote intellectual exploration, and consequently, the curriculum was more diverse. Traditional subjects, such as Greek and Latin, were still taught, but additional emphasis was given to courses that were "practical, such as courses in application of science and new technology." That is, students learned skills and ideas that were more functional than scholarly or religious (Spring, 2008).

Moreover, this practical curriculum distinguished academies as the first step towards a secular education (Spring, 2008). As a result, they are thought to be a more genuine example of how schools can facilitate social mobility because there was not any notion of pre-destination that is associated with Protestant Calvinism. The academy was indisputably the most significant pre-Revolutionary change to the public education system in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Shortly after the Revolutionary War, profound ideological changes took place regarding education. The Colonies realized that they were no longer acting in their own independent



interests. Instead, they, as 13 new states, needed to act as one, unified country. Thus, in response to this change, many Americans felt that there should be a public education system; schools were needed to promote nationalism as well as socialize citizens. This was the first national call for a truly public and systematic model of education in America, and it would be the beginning of the end for grammar schools, apprenticeships, and academies (Spring, 2008).

Though it seems that the 18<sup>th</sup> was largely uneventful in regards to public education, the few changes that did occur were considerable. In the first half of the century, the academy emerged as an alternative to the grammar school, and it would remain popular throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the academy with its modern and secular approach to public education also served as the prototype for the modern American high school, which is a significant component of today's public education system (Spring, 2008). In the latter part of the century, a new public consensus emerged in favor of a national public education system that would advance nationalism and socialization. This call for unity forever changed both the purpose and the function of the American public school system.

#### *Public Education in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*

From the very beginning until the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, public education in the United States underwent considerable changes—both in its purposes and in the ways it functioned. Though there was a public outcry for a national education system at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it would take several decades for a truly universal system to emerge. Instead, the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by charity schools.

Though not truly public, charity schools emerged as a means to educate large portions of the population. , Also referred to as Lancasterian schools, charity schools were mainly located in urban areas because they were intended to educate the children of the poor; this demographic

was thought to be the most in need of learning both the social skills and national values that the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century recognized as a necessary part of public education. (Allison, 1995).

Primarily, charity schools occupied children's time and kept them off the streets. However, these schools also allowed poor children to have a "protected childhood," meaning that children were actually allowed to enjoy their youth rather than be forced by circumstances to grow up too quickly (Spring, 2008).

Since the poor did not have the means to pay for these schools, both wealthy individuals and philanthropic organizations that felt committed to the *noblesse oblige* philosophy funded and managed them. Hence, this is where the name "charity school" originated (Allison, 1995).

Though the premise of the charity school seems largely selfless, the persons and organizations that supported charity schools did have somewhat of a personal agenda as well: the general betterment of society. The curriculum of charity schools was modeled after the belief that poor children needed a moral education to overcome poverty. This moral education was intended to make up for the lack of socialization that should have occurred in the home, and, in turn, it would theoretically equip students with the skills needed to effectively function in society. In a cause-and-effect fashion, charity schools essentially improved political, social, and economical aspects of American society by breaking the cycle of poverty. Charity schools were for the benefit of the greater good just as much as they were for the benefit of the individual pupil (Spring, 2008).

The belief that schools could and should socialize children grew in popularity in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually, this led to the general opinion that all youths should attend school, not just those who happened to live near a charity school or who were wealthy and could attend private schools. Thus, in the 1830s, the common school was born; this was the first

federal system for public education (Spring, 2008). Educational reformist Horace Mann, who is often dubbed “the father of the common school”, spearheaded this movement for universal education. Common schools were open to all, and they were totally free. Parents did not have to pay tuition for their children to attend or sign an “oath of poverty,” as some charity schools required. Rather, common schools were largely funded by local property taxes, thus establishing the local sovereignty that still exists for today’s public school system. (Urban & Wagoner, 2009).

In his book *The American School: From the Puritans to No Child Left Behind*, Spring (2008) concisely summarizes the purpose behind the common school movement: “The common school was to be administered by the state and local governments for the purpose of achieving public goals, such as remedying social, political, and economic problems” (78). Essentially, common schools were intended to be the cure-all for society’s problems. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, universal education was considered the doorway to a utopian world. Unfortunately, however, it is important to note that this utopian ideology of the common school movement did not necessarily reflect the reality of the public school system (Spring, 2008). In fact, many felt that common schools perpetuated the status quo. Instead of fixing the social problems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as class division or racism, the public school system merely replicated them..

When the common school movement first began, emphasis was placed on creating elementary schools (Urban & Wagoner, 2009). However, by the middle of the century, the common school system had evolved into an extensive structure that was divided into twelve grades based on pupils’ ages (Kirkendall, Kuenzli, & Reeves, 1948). By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, kindergartens also became a part of the system. Eventually, the common school became the educational bureaucracy that is familiar today; districts had a chain-of-command that

started with superintendents and ended with teachers. Moreover, the curriculum also became uniform during this time, and every school in any given district taught the same subject matter (Spring, 2008).

Bureaucracy and curriculum uniformity were not the only changes that accompanied the common school movement. In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States experienced many social changes such as immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. In response to these changes, public schools incorporated several “social programs” to help assuage some of the negative effects that followed. Home economics, for example, was intended to simplify household chores for women. As a result, women could devote more of their time to more noble efforts such as child rearing, education, and social reform. School cafeterias were another form of social intervention; they provided nutritious meals to students who would have otherwise gone without food. Playgrounds and summer school were yet another social provision, and, like charity schools, they were intended to keep kids occupied and off the streets. The public school system became so entwined with social welfare that by the 1890s, many schools functioned as community centers. In fact, many new schools built during this time were designed to function as both schools and community centers (Spring, 2008). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, schools were no longer for children. Rather, they were “common” schools in the literal sense—meant for all genders and ages.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a pivotal time for public education in the United States. Building on the momentum of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, charity schools were established with the purpose to socialize the poor and consequently improve the nation. This idea spread quickly, and the charity school gave way to the common school system, the first federal system for public education. The common school was meant to remedy to all of society’s ills; however, whether

they really could was hotly debated. Furthermore, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the social problems facing America were so vast the “traditional school” was no longer sufficient. Common schools had to expand their services in an effort to keep up with demand, and many social programs became a part of public education. Most of these programs are a part of today’s public school system. Still, this is not the only legacy that schools left during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; graded schools, uniform curriculum, and bureaucracy all found their niche in public education during this era.

### *Public Education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

Like the 19<sup>th</sup> century, public education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century believed in the cure-all power of socialization, but instead of capitalizing on the political, social, and economic benefits that could be reaped, the focus narrowed to one that was purely economic. Fixing the economy was considered the most efficient method for addressing all other problems. That is, it was thought that political and social problems would become obsolete if society’s economic issues were addressed. . In fact, the purpose of public education during this period could be summarized in two words: human capital. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, schools were meant to cultivate the abilities, skills, and knowledge of students so that they could effectively contribute to the workforce upon graduating from secondary school. This would ultimately better the economy (Spring, 2007; Allison, 1995). While there was not much dissent regarding the purpose of public education during this era, there was significant variation in the methods used to meet this purpose; these variations were largely due to either progress or current events.

In the early part of the century, a differentiated curriculum taught at a comprehensive high school was considered an effective means of producing human capital. A differentiated curriculum consisted of two types of courses: college prep and vocational. By offering a wide

range of courses, every student could specialize in something and, in turn, fulfill his or her economic obligation to society. Though a differentiated curriculum may seem fundamentally unfair because it is not uniform, supporters of it argued that it promoted equality of opportunity because it allowed students to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses (Spring, 2008). As a result, students had an even greater chance of social mobility (Allison, 1995).

Theoretically, a differentiated curriculum seems like the ideal educational model; however, by the 1920s and 30s, scientific management destroyed any semblance of equality of opportunity that had previously existed. This is because testing, rather than student preference, determined which courses were taken. Consequently, students were objectively pre-sorted into their future careers. Proponents of this practice felt that it was both highly efficient and fair because everyone took the same tests (Spring, 2008).

This achievement-based method of differentiation prevailed throughout the first half of the twentieth-century. However, with the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s, the differentiated curriculum met criticism. With the launch of *Sputnik* in 1958, many Americans felt that schools were too focused on the socialization process and therefore lacked the ability to teach a rigorous curriculum consisting of traditional subjects such as mathematics and science (Wright, 2006). In response to this outcry, the federal government enacted the *National Defense Education Act* of 1958 (NDEA). According to Wright (2006), this act stated, “[A]n educational emergency exists and requires action by the federal government. Assistance will come from Washington to help develop as rapidly as possible those skills essential to the national security” (p. 92). The “assistance” detailed in the NDEA included a surge in national spending for public education; in fact, federal spending nearly doubled after the NDEA was passed. A significant portion of this money was spent on a renewed interest in teaching the skills that were considered “essential to

the national security.” These skills primarily math and science courses, but an emphasis in foreign languages also emerged. After the passage of the NDEA, the purpose of public education shifted to focus on producing human capital that could contribute to the arms race (Spring, 2008). Still, it is important to note that the curriculum during this time remained differentiated; not all students could enroll in science and math courses. Only students who showed merit in these areas were permitted to take them (Wright, 2006).

Shortly after the NDEA was passed, the federal government felt that public schools were still unable to maximize the full scope of human capital, and despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that occurred more than a decade earlier, segregation and poverty shared the blame for this. Students affected by these two factors were thought to be fundamentally disadvantaged; they had more to overcome than mere homework or test anxiety. Their success hinged on their ability to beat the cycle of poverty and discrimination. Consequently, they would never reach their maximum potential (Spring, 2008).

In response to this evident inequality of opportunity, the federal government passed *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) in 1965. This act was a part of President Johnson’s “War on Poverty,” and it was designed to restore equality of opportunity to the public education system by providing more federal funds for education (Wright, 2006). Moreover, the ESEA would increase the overall level of human capital for the United States and therefore enable the public school system to carry out its intended purpose. Many provisions were made in the ESEA; however, the most significant part of the act was Title I (United States Department of Education, 2004). Title I specifically addressed the poverty and discrimination facing many students because it gave more funding to low-income area schools, where both facilities and

resources are limited (Spring, 2008). To qualify as a Title I school, 40% of students enrolled had to be eligible for free or reduced lunch (United States Department of Education, 2004).

The next significant change that developed in regards to public education occurred in the 1980s and continued throughout the remainder of the century. Public education was still seen as a means of producing human capital; however, in last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this ideal transformed into its most literal sense, and public education adopted many businesslike practices. In fact, in the 1980s many partnerships were actually established between individual businesses and local schools (Spring, 2008).

The catalyst for this corporate trend was *A Nation at Risk*, a report that was published in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk* basically stated that while the United States was a world power in the global market, public schools were not adapting their curriculum to meet the demands of globalization (Wright, 2006). Essentially, schools were producing human capital that was out-of-date.

The Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations all made it their mission to solve this discrepancy. Immediately after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the demand grew for curriculum to be less differentiated; the argument was that all students needed to experience the same rigorous education. It was thought that by raising the educational standards, the overall quality of human capital would increase (Wright, 2006).

Also in response to *A Nation at Risk*, the Bush administration introduced Goals 2000. This educational reform plan had four parts: creation of model schools, national standards, voluntary national achievement tests, and provisions for parental choice. This plan was intended to elevate the quality of public education in the United States, and it had significant popularity. In fact, the Clinton administration supported it as well and signed its own version of the plan:



Goals 2000 Educate America Act (Spring, 2008). The Clinton administration also signed the *Improving America's Schools Act* (IASA) of 1994 in an effort to identify and assist schools in need of improvement (Mead, 2007). In large, the efforts directed towards public education 1980s and 1990s were intended to improve schools, making them more efficient manufacturers of human capital.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many significant and lasting changes had occurred in regards to public education in the United States. Throughout the span of one hundred years, several different strategies had been implemented that would allow public schools to produce human capital. Differentiated curriculums and Title I schools are terms that are still catchphrases today. Still, more importantly, the 20<sup>th</sup> century left many big questions concerning public education unanswered: How can equality of opportunity be achieved? How can public education help students overcome poverty? What is the best plan to truly improve the state of public education? These are the questions that were inevitably inherited by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and they continue to play a substantial role in shaping both the purpose and function of current public educational trends.

#### Public Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 has largely dominated both the purpose and function of public education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Consequently, this section is a commentary on No Child Left Behind and its individual provisions. It is divided into six sub-sections: a summary of the legislation, followed by four separate discussions of its specific provisions, and it ends with a critique of the initiative. Though it has only been in effect for seven years, the *No Child Left Behind Act* is a complex piece of legislation, and this section can only give a snapshot of its total significance in regards to public education.

*A Summary of No Child Left Behind*

The *No Child Left Behind Act* was created in 2001 and was signed on January 8, 2002 as a bi-partisan reauthorization of the ESEA of 1965 (United States Department of Education, 2004; United States Department of Education, 2007). The fundamental purpose of NCLB is to improve public education by establishing equality of educational opportunity for all students enrolled in a public school (Spring, 2008). There is a notable difference between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in this regard: in the former, emphasis was placed on total equality of opportunity. The latter, however, is more pragmatic; NCLB acknowledges that inequality from external factors, such as poverty, will inevitably exist to some extent, but they can be eradicated in the public education system. Thus, NCLB stresses equality of *educational* opportunity rather than absolute equality of opportunity. No Child Left Behind focuses on what can be done in the schools, and it strives to close the gap in achievement levels among different student demographics (United States Department of Education, 2007).

Still lingering from the 20<sup>th</sup> century is also the belief that equality educational opportunity has the potential to produce human capital. According to a report published by the United States Department of Education in 2004, a significant increase in the quality of education can improve the Gross Domestic Product as much as 4% in twenty years; this figure is equivalent to nearly 4 billion dollars. So not only will NCLB better the individual, but it will also serve to benefit the greater good.

The *No Child Left Behind Act* has set specific goals and stipulations in the name of equality of educational opportunity. Primarily, it requires that public schools make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) towards 100% proficiency in math and reading by the 2013-2014 school year (Armour-Garb, 2008; Hoxby, 2005). While this is a national goal, what counts

as “proficient” is actually determined by individual states. Each state is required to establish uniform standards and assessments as a way to measure AYP (Spring, 2008). If a school fails to make AYP for two consecutive years, it must take corrective action. If the school still fails to make AYP for each consecutive year following, the sanctions increase until the sixth year when the school must implement its previously designed reconstruction plan. Restructuring usually consists of removing or replacing staff, and often, only the principal is replaced. If a school still does not make AYP after restructuring, it is designated as a “failing” school, and it faces state take-over or privatization (Mead, 2007).

Mary Jo Reiff

**Comment:** Either “counts as proficient” or “constitutes proficiency”

Though legislation such as ESEA and IASA had previously demonstrated the national government’s potential to influence public education, the *No Child Left Behind Act* is unprecedented in the level of power the national government can exert in regards to public education (Gay, 2007). Historically, individual states have been responsible for overseeing education, and the role of the federal government has traditionally been to provide supplemental funding (Wright, 2006). However, under NCLB, the federal government is directly involved with public education, demanding that states make progress. Moreover, states must be accountable, employ highly qualified teachers, use research-based instructional methods, and provide choice if the preceding endeavors fail to occur.

#### *Accountability and No Child Left Behind*

As previously aforementioned, No Child Left Behind requires schools to make AYP; this ensures that schools are accountable for meeting their own standards. Accountability is largely demonstrated through standardized testing. These standardized assessments, just like the educational standards, are designed and implemented by individual states. Before NCLB was implemented, many states already had accountability systems in place that used standardized

testing; however, no state's system met the accountability standards of No Child Left Behind. The stipulations concerning accountability under NCLB are much more stringent and complex. Consequently, many states had to increase the number of tests administered. Now, states are required to test annually students in grades 3-8 in the subject areas of reading and math, and students must be tested in both subjects once more during high school (Goertz, 2005). Moreover, students must now be tested in science once every three years (Kymes, 2004).

Even though states do have the freedom to design their own standards and assessments, No Child Left Behind requires that they be tested against the standards put forth by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). The NAEP is considered to be the best and only valid common achievement measure that can be used to compare states' standards (Chubb, Walberg, 2005). Consequently, every other year, each state is required to have some of its schools take the NAEP assessment as a type of "spot check." Incidentally though, the NAEP's standards are high, and only about one-third of the national student population are able to meet them (Chubb, 2005). This is a consequence of allowing states to set their own standards. The NAEP assessments reveal that some states appear to have high-performing students, but in reality their standards are simply set below what the NAEP deems proficient. Conversely, some states appear to have low-achievement levels, but their standards are set higher than what is considered proficient (Peterson, 2007). Still, these discrepancies are not taken into consideration when AYP for different schools in different states is calculated and consequently the NAEP polices states' accountability systems. The provision in NCLB for states' flexibility is merely a formality. In order to reach proficiency, all states' standards must "flex" in the direction of the NAEP standards.

#### *Highly Qualified Teachers and No Child Left Behind*

Another stipulation of the *No Child Left Behind Act* is that public schools only employ “highly qualified” teachers. Studies suggest that teacher quality has the greatest influence on how much students learn (Moe, 2005). In fact, teacher quality has been proven to be more important than race, socio-economic status, or classroom size in determining an individual student’s level of success (Kymes, 2004). Consequently, NCLB mandates that all teachers must be highly qualified. Before NCLB, the individual states were allowed to determine who was qualified to teach within the confines of the state. Now, in any state, to be considered highly qualified, teachers must have a bachelor’s degree as well as state-certification of expertise in the subjects that are taught (United States Department of Education, 2007). Upon the passage of NCLB, all new graduates had to meet these standards, and previously employed teachers who did not already meet these standards had to be highly qualified by the end of the 2005-2006 academic year (Kymes, 2004).

*Research-Based Instructional Strategies and No Child Left Behind*

In addition to having highly qualified teachers in every classroom, all teachers must also use proven, research-based methods of instruction (United States Department of Education, 2007). Basically, this means that all academic programs must be scientifically proven to be effective (Kymes, 2004). This requires that teachers not only consult scholarly journals and texts to find new instructional strategies, but they are also encouraged to conduct their own research in the classroom. In fact, many teacher education programs at colleges and universities are teaching pre-service teachers this skill. For example, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, all pre-service teacher interns must conduct a yearlong action research project that entails a literature review and in-classroom experimentation. The culmination of this project is final paper and presentation, which serves as the interns’ Master theses. Thus, all research is

essentially shared among colleagues, which spreads new, innovative forms of research-based instruction. Using research-based instructional strategies ensures that time within the classroom is used effectively.

*Choice and No Child Left Behind*

If schools consistently fail to make AYP, No Child Left Behind provides parents with the choice of transferring their students to another “passing” school in the area (Kymes, 2004). However, this is not always possible because many high-achieving schools are already at capacity. Anticipating this, NCLB made provisions for another alternative: charter schools. Charter schools are schools that are publicly funded but privately run. As a result, they are held to the same standards as the state they are in, but they do not have to abide by as many regulations as mainstream public schools do (United States Department of Education, 2004). Finally, in some cases, parents can also use vouchers. Vouchers are publicly and privately funded scholarships that parents can use to send their children to private schools or another public school outside of their district (Culson, 1998).

*A Critique of No Child Left Behind*

Like any major policy, No Child Left Behind has been the recipient of much praise and criticism. On a positive note, the driving purpose of NCLB is admirable; establishing equality of educational opportunity and consequently narrowing the achievement gap is a worthy goal. Superficially, its stipulations are also laudable (Fusarelli, 2005). It is hard to find fault with the objectives of hiring highly qualified employees, using research-based instructional strategies, and holding schools accountable. In the right context, providing parents with school choice even seems like a legitimate provision. While it is difficult to oppose these ideals at face value, criticism for NCLB does exist regarding the some of the specific logistics for implementing these

provisions. The criticism is mainly directed towards two main areas: funding for the initiative and its system for enforcing accountability. For these two reasons, many opponents of the *No Child Left Behind Act* feel that it is fundamentally flawed and therefore cannot fulfill its intended purpose.

Much evidence exists to support the argument that No Child Left Behind is under funded. An article written in 2004 by Guisbond and Neill states, "NCLB [assumes] that schools already have adequate resources to get all students to a proficient level" (13). However, many of the schools that are consistently failing to make AYP are the ones that are already at a fiscal disadvantage; their facilities, resources, and support are already sub-par. They do not have sufficient funds to meet the initial needs of the school much less the additional needs that are mandated under NCLB as part of their school improvement plans. Additionally, standardized testing costs about twenty dollars per pupil; though this may seem relatively inexpensive compared to other forms of assessment, an increase in testing diverts more money from an already limited budget. For school systems that spend less per pupil than the \$7,250 national average, this testing fee is an even greater burden (Walberg, 2005; Goertz, 2005). Gay (2007) sums it up when he states, "NCLB policy makers...have not pursued an aggressive course of action to eliminate inequities in educational resources" (284). It is unrealistic to think that equality of educational opportunity can exist in the midst of such disparities. Without proper funding, No Child Left Behind will undoubtedly fail to achieve its goals.

However, even if the *No Child Left Behind Act* was sufficiently funded, it would still face much criticism because of its accountability system. As previously discussed, NCLB requires states to hold themselves accountable by testing students several times in reading, math, and science. The most efficient way to do this is by using standardized tests. As a result, much time

in the classroom is now devoted to learning the material that is to be tested; this can lead to a “narrowing of the curriculum” because in a world of high-stakes testing, teachers and students alike do not want to “waste” time covering material that will not be on the test. Moreover, since so much time is also spent teaching test-taking strategies, standardized tests could essentially be a measurement of some students’ testing abilities rather than an assessment of what they have learned (Lin, 2002).

Standardized tests are also criticized because they assess a limited scope of a student’s skills and abilities. Typically, these tests assess the lower-order thinking skills of Bloom’s taxonomy such as basic recall or simple interpretation. They do not usually require students to analyze, evaluate, or synthesize; thus, students cannot demonstrate the full extent of their learning (Guisbond & Neill, 2004). Furthermore, using only this type of assessment assumes that learning is not multi-faceted and highly contextual (Gay, 2007). Instead, standardized tests venerate knowledge above all else. They do not acknowledge that other types of intelligence, such as interpersonal or kinesthetic intelligence, are equally valid bodies of intellect. While test scores may have improved since No Child Left Behind was implemented, it does not necessarily mean that students are learning more (United States Department of Education, 2007). In fact, it could mean that they are actually learning less because their in-class instruction has been limited to teaching only the skills or knowledge that is needed to do well on the standardized tests.

The accountability system of No Child Left Behind is not only criticized for the type of testing it uses but also for how the results of the tests are used. Most standardized tests are norm-referenced tests, meaning that students are scored in comparison to one another (Walberg, 2005). Norm-referenced tests are akin the classic “bell curve” that distributes the population into below-average, average, and above-average categories; this is called a “normal distribution.” For norm-



referenced tests to be valid, a percentage of students must “fail,” meaning their results are the ones that lie to the far left of the bell curve (Guisbond & Neill, 2004). Furthermore, if these students are all attending the same school, then that school, as a whole, will also fall in the below-average range of the normal distribution.

Ordinarily, norm-referenced testing is not entirely negative. At times, it is quite useful to see how students—and schools—compare to one another. However, for No Child Left Behind, this norm-referenced testing occurs within the confines of a “status model” (Piché, 2007). In laymen’s terms, a status model compares the current students’ scores to last year’s students’ scores. For example, if a current third grade class has an average reading vocabulary score in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, but the third grade class from the previous year had an average reading vocabulary score in the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile, then it would seem that this year’s third graders have not made improvement. In fact, it seems that they have regressed. However, it could be that last year, as second graders, they had an average reading vocabulary score in the 45<sup>th</sup> percentile, meaning they actually did improve. Unfortunately, a status model does not demonstrate this kind of improvement. Consequently, external factors such as rezoning, new instructional materials, a significant replacement of staff, or an increase in the number of students with disabilities could cause significant discrepancies between classes. Using norm-referenced tests in a status model makes it nearly impossible to determine whether schools are truly making AYP and therefore are accountable.

Under No Child Left Behind, standardized test scores are used to evaluate entire schools as well as individual at-risk groups such as students who are English Language Learners or who have special needs. All groups must be “proficient” for a school to make AYP; however, this is a difficult goal to accomplish because most of the students in these subgroups must take the same

assessments as general education students. Only 1% of a school's student population can be counted as "proficient" or "advanced" on an alternative assessment. Unfortunately, this 1% is equivalent to roughly 8% of the total population of students with disabilities. While not all students with disabilities should be permitted to take modified assessment, many more than what is currently allowed should be able to do so. It is estimated that one-fourth of schools are not making AYP because of the unrealistic and stringent expectations placed on subgroups (Goertz, 2005).

It seems highly unlikely that No Child Left Behind is truly closing the achievement gap when its accountability system is so flawed. Regardless, it is safe to say that even if NCLB is achieving its goals, this system will not accurately report it as true. "Accountability" in itself is an abstract term and is therefore difficult to measure. Yet, viable alternatives exist for each of the shortcomings described. If implemented, perhaps they would better assess NCLB's ability to foster equality of educational opportunity.

#### Proposed Solutions for the Future of Public Education

Since the purpose and functions of education are the themes of this paper, this section will be divided into those sub-sections. Notably, the proposed solutions primarily focus on remedying the problems of the *No Child Left Behind Act*; however, some additional input regarding other aspects of the future of public education is included.

#### *The Future Purpose of Public Education*

On the whole, the purpose of public education in the future should be quite similar to its present purpose: equality of educational opportunity. However, this purpose cannot exist in isolation. This goal is context-specific, and it cannot and will not be achieved unless it is qualified. In the past, an element of pragmatism has been overlooked. Public education should

strive to create equality of educational *opportunity* not equality of educational *results*. This means that public education should theoretically provide students with comparable facilities, resources, and support. This does not mean, however, that schools can or should equally distribute motivation, aptitude, or intelligence. These are external, largely pre-determined factors that a school can only hope to improve on an individual basis. Consequently, while schools should be held to high standards, these standards should not be unrealistic. Setting standards without considering the effects of external factors is akin to expecting failure. Though published in 1948, a report by Kirkendall, Kuenzli, and Reeves supports this practical approach to public education. They write, “Schools must...not destroy the natural and healthy impulse of an individual to achieve to the fullest extent of his own potentialities” (12). Students will inevitably vary, but their access to a quality education should not.

#### *The Future Functions of Public Education*

To meet this newly qualified definition of equality of educational opportunity, many modifications need to be made to the existing provisions of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, either as a reauthorization or as an entirely new piece of legislation. The majority of these changes would obviously affect NCLB’s accountability system, since that is source of so many of the current frustrations.

Systematically, public education in the United States should continue to be largely decentralized (Wright, 2006). The national government should serve only two roles in regards to public education: it should provide supplemental funding and impose national standards. Accountability is meaningless unless all parties are held accountable to the same level of standards. Setting national educational standards is crucial to achieving equality of educational opportunity because this will ensure that all students in every state are working towards the

same, specified goals regardless of funding or resources. Basically, this means that all students will be presented with the same level of intellectual stimulation. Thus, instead of letting each state set its own educational standards, the national government should set them; this uniformity will establish an authentic accountability. Since the NAEP already sets “unofficial” national standards, it would be quite simple for them to be adopted by the federal government. While setting national education standards may seem like an encroachment of states’ rights, states will still be able to maintain their sovereignty by deciding how to meet these standards and how meeting the standards is assessed.

As of 2005, it was estimated that only one-third of the student population could meet or surpass the standards put forth by NAEP (Chubb, 2005). Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that if the NAEP’s standards were adopted today, the majority of students would not be proficient. Raising the standards overnight will not produce an overnight change in student performance. Therefore, when states are determining how to assess Annual Yearly Progress, it should be measured just as that—progress.

It is okay to use standardized testing as one way to measure AYP. Standardized tests in themselves are not the issue; however, they become a problem when they are overused, misused, and poorly purposed (Barrier-Ferreira, 2008). Standardized tests should be both norm-referenced and criterion-referenced. That is, scores should be reported as both a percentile and a ratio. The scores should be norm-referenced so that states, schools, and classrooms can see how effective their instructional strategies and curricula are in comparison with other states, schools, or classrooms. However, standardized tests should also be criterion-referenced so that if all parties involved in the assessment are performing at reasonably high rates, a slightly lower variation in performance would not label a school as “failing.”

Additionally, when measuring AYP, standardized tests should be incorporated into a growth model (Piché, 2007). A growth model is designed to measure improvement from year to year. Using a growth model will ensure that the states, schools, and classes that cannot immediately meet the NAEP standards would still be able to demonstrate their yearly progress towards this ultimate goal. Currently, many states have already implemented growth models in their intrastate accountability systems; they use them to assess the progress of individual teachers and students (Fusarelli, 2005). It would be fairly simple to integrate this model of measurement into NCLB, and it would provide a more valid measurement of AYP.

Still, standardized tests should not only be purposed for measuring AYP. Since students are subjected to taking them, they should also directly benefit from them. Therefore, standardized tests should not be used for “high-stakes” testing, meaning that sanctions should not be attached to them. Rather, standardized tests should be used as diagnostic evaluations that reveal students’ academic strengths and weaknesses. Diagnostic testing is a useful tool for students, parents, and educators alike. It provides useful, concrete feedback about students’ skills and abilities, and based on this information, at-risk students can get the assistance they need in a timely manner (Wolf, 2007). Diagnostic testing can be especially useful for students who are English Language Learners or who have disabilities because this type of testing can measure these students against the national standards without penalizing them or their school.

While standardized tests are diagnostically useful and can be used to measure AYP, they should not be the only type of assessment that is used. As previously discussed this, exclusive use of standardized testing is not a valid way to assess school and student performance. Furthermore, it can narrow the curriculum, causing significant learning objectives and experiences to be excluded from the curriculum. According to Wolf, this problem can be

remedied by simply expanding the material that is included on a standardized test (2007).

However, this seems like it would only further add to the stress and anxiety that many already associate with standardized testing (Gay, 2007). Instead, a simple solution to this narrowing of the curriculum is for states to be permitted to use other types of assessment in addition to test scores when measuring AYP. The type of assessment used could be determined on a district-by-district basis that is approved by the state.

Using alternative assessments is exponentially beneficial. First and foremost, it preserves the highly individualized and contextual nature of learning. It acknowledges that not all students learn in the same way; therefore, their learning cannot be completely assessed using only a uniform test. Secondly, accepting another form of assessment allows different areas and regions to assess their own strengths and weaknesses. It is difficult for every state to know what is best for every single public school, let alone the national government. Districts, on the other hand, know the needs of their schools. Thus, they will be able to effectively discern whether the alternative assessment used is really measuring progress. Finally, accepting alternative forms of assessment actually widens the curriculum because it is inclusive. Skills and subjects that are not traditionally included on standardized tests can be assessed through other means. With this testing strategy, vocational courses such as Family and Consumer Sciences or Agriculture and electives such as World Literature or Psychology will be just as important as the core subjects. As a result, both practical and higher-order thinking skills will once again regain their place in public education. This widening of the curriculum, in turn, actually reinforces the intended purpose of public education because, logically speaking, there will be even more educational opportunities for students.

Though the term “alternative assessment” seems highly subjective and therefore difficult to implement, these perceptions are unfounded in reality. Many school districts already use a variety of alternative assessment methods; however, these assessments give feedback at the classroom level, and they are not currently used to measure a school’s AYP. Some examples of alternative assessment include semester or yearlong student portfolios, performance-based checklists, or student-led thinking curricula, where students choose their own area of expertise and complete a project to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of a course’s content. According to Lin (2002), any assessment that requires a student to “engage in self-reflective learning” is both meaningful and accurate (45). The previously mentioned all meet this criteria, probably more so than a standardized test. Allowing states to incorporate methods of alternative assessment for the measurement of AYP allows states to exercise legitimate flexibility. Moreover, it allows teachers and school districts to tailor assessments to what is contextually or personally relevant to students. Alternative assessments give students the opportunity to truly demonstrate their learning, rather than regurgitate knowledge onto a bubble sheet.

These revisions in the accountability system should significantly reduce the number of schools that will need improvement plans or restructuring. After all, the goals for public education should be high but largely achievable if the right steps are taken. However, there is the reality that some schools will still fail to make AYP. In these cases, the federal government should not merely mandate sanctions. The federal government cannot ask states to meet specific standards and then not be willing to offer support when they are not met. Struggling schools should not be punished; instead, they should be helped. Primarily, this help consists of supplemental funds. After all, states have jurisdiction over school districts; they should still oversee the logistics of school improvement. Still, states cannot implement appropriate plans of action unless they are

subsidized. If the federal government is going to demand that schools be accountable, then it needs to be willing to finance this endeavor. This does not mean that it is the federal government's responsibility to ensure that the per-pupil expenditure is equal for every school in every state. Equal funding for education is beyond the jurisdiction of the federal government. However, according to Gay (2007), it does mean, "paying the costs required of the reform mandates" (290). Simply put, it is the federal government's responsibility to supplement the resources that states cannot provide so that schools can make AYP.

Fixing the problems associated with the *No Child Left Behind Act* will not remedy all of the problems that exist in regards to public education; however, it is a start. Once a legitimate and authentic system of accountability is implemented and the appropriate funding is allocated, the focus can shift to expanding and refining the curriculum to further meet the purpose of equality of educational opportunity. There can and should be academic and vocational programs available in public schools. Moreover, there should also be a "citizenship" component of the curriculum. According to Barrier-Ferreira (2008), "Schools must be about achieving a balance between developing the intellectual, emotional, and social selves of each individual" (139). In other words, though a quality education, students should effectively reach their utmost potential. This is an idea that is not limited to educational discourse; it has popular consensus as well. In a recent Gallup poll, Americans thought that the goals of public schools should be to prepare responsible citizens and help students become economically self-sufficient (Guisbond & Neill, 2004). These are both noble and pragmatic goals, and they can be fully met in the name of equality of educational opportunity. Still, these functional goals of public education cannot be met until the problems associated with NCLB are addressed. Public education in the United States certainly has its work cut out for itself.



## Final Thoughts

For more than four centuries, the purposes and functions for public education have evolved alongside the progression of American society. Though public education systems of the past vastly contrast modern public education, each era has left its own, unique legacy that has contributed to the development of the current public education system. One prevailing purpose, in particular, has been that public education has the potential to alleviate social problems, and as a result, holistically improve society. This is an idea that emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was further refined in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries alike. Today, within the context of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, this purpose has semantically manifested itself as equality in educational opportunity. Still, fundamental flaws within the legislation make it logistically impossible for this purpose to be fulfilled.

A variety of suggestions were made in this paper for improving No Child Left Behind; they were not the first, and they certainly will not be the last. Still, as long as public education continues to be faced with problems, discourse concerning public education should be prevalent. If public education truly is the path to a better society, then it is in the best interest of the individual and the greater good to perfect both its purposes and functions. Public education should not merely be an opportunity; rather, it should be *the* opportunity.

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